Hasina alleges elections will not be free

NEW DELHI: Bangladesh's former leader Sheikh Hasina alleged on Friday that elections next month would not be free or fair, in her first public speech since being sentenced to death in absentia for crimes against humanity.

The nation of 170 million people votes on Feb 12 to choose a new leadership after prolonged political turmoil following the overthrow of Hasina's autocratic government in Aug 2024.

Hasina, 78, fled to India after a student-led uprising ended her 15-year, iron-fisted rule, and has not been seen in public since.

Her speech is likely to further aggravate ties between New Delhi and Dhaka, which have soured since her ouster.

"Bangladesh stands today at the edge of an abyss, a nation battered and bleeding," Hasina said in English during an audio message broadcast to a packed press club in the Indian capital.

"Democracy is now in exile," she said.

In November, Hasina was found guilty by a Dhaka court of incitement, order to kill and inaction to prevent atrocities, and sentenced to be hanged.

The activities of her former ruling Awami League, once the country's most popular party, have been outlawed.

"Bangladesh must defend and restore the constitution written in the blood of martyrs, reclaim our independence, safeguard our sovereignty, and revive our democracy," Hasina said.

Muhammad Yunus, the 85-year-old Nobel Peace Prize winner who returned from exile after Sheikh Hasina's ouster at the behest of protesters to lead a caretaker government, will step down after the polls.

Yunus said the vote will "set the standard for good elections", his office said in a statement on Friday.

But Hasina struck a defiant tone, attacking her longtime rival.

"Bangladesh will never experience free and fair elections until the shadow that Yunus casts is lifted from the people of Bangladesh," she said.

Bangladeshi parties launched their official campaigns on Thursday.—AFP

KURDISH women braid their hair during a demonstration in Erbil, the capital of Iraq's Kurdish region, as a symbolic gesture of solidarity with the women who fought in Syria. Women in Iraqi Kurdistan braided their hair to protest a viral video showing a Syrian soldier bragging about cutting a Kurdish fighter's braid. In Kurdish culture, braids are a symbol of resistance and a sign of beauty and strength.—AFP

Europeans among 150 IS detainees transferred from Syria to Iraq

RAQA: Europeans were among 150 Islamic State (IS) group detainees transferred this week by the US military from Kurdish custody in Syria to Iraq, whose premier urged EU countries to repatriate their nationals.

They were among an estimated 7,000 members of the militant group due to be moved across the border to Iraq as the Kurdish-led force that has held them for years relinquishes swathes of territory to the advancing Syrian army.

In 2014, IS swept across Syria and Iraq, committing massacres but backed by a US-led coalition, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) ultimately defeated the outfit in Syria five years later.

This month, the United States said the purpose of its alliance with the Kurds had largely expired, as Syria's new authorities pressed an offensive to take back territory long held by the SDF, which agreed to withdraw from swathes of territory in the north and east.

The EU said on Friday that alleged breakouts by detained IS foreign fighters in Syria were of "paramount concern" and it was monitoring the transfer of prisoners to Iraq, "including foreign terrorist fighters".

An Iraqi security official said the 150 detainees, which the US military transferred to Iraq on Wednesday, were "all leaders of the IS, and some of the most notorious criminals". They included "Europeans, Asians, Arabs and Iraqis".

Another Iraqi security source said the group included "85 Iraqis and 65 others of various nationalities, including Europeans, Sudanese, Somalis, and people from the Caucasus region".

They "all participated in IS operations in Iraq", including the 2014 offensive that saw the militant group seize large areas of Iraq and Syria, he added.—AFP

Trump says Nato troops avoided Afghan front line

British PM slams the remarks as 'insulting', recalling UK lost 457 troops in Afghanistan

LONDON: British Prime Minister Keir Starmer on Friday denounced as "insulting" Donald Trump's claim that British troops avoided the front line in Afghanistan, amid widespread anger at the US president's remarks.

In an interview with *Fox News* aired on Thursday, Trump appeared unaware that 457 British soldiers were among Nato troops who died during the conflict in Afghanistan following the attacks on Sept 11, 2001.

"They'll say they sent some troops to Afghanistan," Trump told the US outlet, referring to Nato allies.

"And they did, they stayed a little back, a little off the front lines," he added, triggering outrage across the political divide in Britain and elsewhere in Europe.

Trump also repeated his suggestion that Nato would not come to the aid of the United States if asked to do so. In fact, following the 9/11 attacks, the UK and a number of other allies joined the US in Afghanistan after it invoked Nato's collective security clause for the first and only time. Troops from other Nato countries including Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Denmark also died.

"Let me start by paying tribute to 457 of our armed services who lost their lives in Afghanistan," Starmer said in a video clip from Downing Street.

"There are many also who were injured, some with life-changing injuries, and so I consider President Trump's remarks to be insulting and frankly, appalling, and I'm not surprised they've caused such hurt to the loved ones of those who were killed or injured." He said that if he had misspoken in such a way, he "would certainly apologise".

Poland's Defence Minister Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz said he expected respect for Polish veterans "who have proven how much they serve this country and our commitments to allies".

Poland lost 43 soldiers in the conflict in Afghanistan. British defence minister John Healey posted on X that the British troops who died were "heroes who gave their lives in service of our nation".

Armed forces minister Al Carns, who served five tours in Afghanistan, said Trump's comments were "utterly ridiculous".

Care Minister Stephen Kinnock said he expected Starmer would raise the issue with Trump.

The leader of the opposition Conservatives, Kemi Badenoch, said Trump's comments were "complete nonsense" which could weaken the Nato alliance.

Even Nigel Farage, leader of the anti-immigration Reform UK party, and a long-time Trump supporter, rebuked the American leader.

"Donald Trump is wrong," he said on X. "For 20 years our armed forces fought bravely alongside America's in Afghanistan."

Lucy Aldridge, whose son William died aged 18 in Afghanistan, told *The Mirror* newspaper that Trump's remarks were "extremely upsetting".

Mark Atkinson, Director General of the veterans' charity, The Royal British Legion, said the service and sacrifice of British troops in Afghanistan "cannot be called into question".—AFP

EU voices doubts over Board of Peace

BRUSSELS: European leaders have serious doubts about the scope of President Donald Trump's "Board of Peace" but are ready to work with the United States and the newly founded body in Gaza, EU chief Antonio Costa said Friday.

"We have serious doubts about a number of elements in the charter of the Board of Peace related to its scope, its governance and its compatibility with the UN Charter," the European Council president said after an EU leaders' summit in Brussels.

"We are ready to work together with the US on the implementation of the comprehensive Peace Plan for Gaza, with a Board of Peace carrying out its mission as a transitional administration".

The founding charter of Trump's body for resolving international conflicts has a $1 billion price tag for permanent membership.

Although originally meant to oversee Gaza's rebuilding, the board's charter does not seem to limit its role to the Palestinian territory and appears to want to rival the United Nations.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez told reporters after the summit that his country had "declined" the invitation to participate in the body.—AFP

Danish PM visits Greenland after US climbdown

NUUK: Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen arrived in Nuuk on Friday for talks with her Greenlandic counterpart after a turbulent week that saw US President Donald Trump back down from threats to seize the Arctic island and agree to negotiations.

Denmark has resisted Trump's demands to take control of Greenland over allegations that China and Russia are trying to gain a foothold in the strategic region, with Copenhagen vowing to beef up its own military presence on the island.

Frederiksen's visit comes after two fraught weeks for Denmark and Greenland, standing up to Trump until Nato Secretary General Mark Rutte reached a purported deal with him on Wednesday that saw the US leader withdraw his threats of military action on Greenland and tariffs against its European allies.

Trump and Rutte agreed on what the US leader called a "framework", the details of which have not been disclosed.

Trump said only that the United States "gets everything we wanted" in the plan, which would be in force "forever".—AFP

Did US president make Davos great again?

DAVOS: US President Donald Trump stole the show at the World Economic Forum in Davos, but he may have also made the annual gabfest of the global elite relevant again - at least for a week.

The relevance of the gathering of CEOs and political leaders in the Swiss Alps is regularly questioned by critics who deride it as an out-of-touch echo chamber where little gets done.

But all eyes were on this year's Davos as Trump barrelled into town with a geopolitical storm hanging over the picturesque ski resort, where he pressed his case to acquire Greenland.

Hundreds of people stood in huge lines to hear Trump deliver a speech that drew gasps and nervous laughs as he mocked allies but also praised the "brilliant" A-listers in the room - and ultimately ruled out using force to take Greenland.

"It's interesting that people were lining up to hear President Trump like they were not lining to hear any other speaker. None has got such kind of interest," Latvian President Edgars Rinkevics said.

"I think that to some extent, Davos is back to what it was meant to be. To hear different perspectives, to argue, to discuss, to disagree sometimes, to agree, to somehow build bridges rather than to destroy them," he said.

Davos became the scene of intense diplomacy, culminating with Trump announcing a "framework of a future deal" on Greenland following talks with Nato Secretary General Mark Rutte.

A day later, Trump met Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky as part of his effort to end Russia's war in Ukraine, while also launching his "Board of Peace".

There was even a rare standing ovation this year - for Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, who described a "rupture" in the global order in a speech that angered Trump.

Failed policies

It had been years since the WEF, founded in 1971, had been at the epicentre of such a momentous political episode.

The forum's previous landmark moments include hosting a thaw in Greek-Turkish tensions in 1988, and talks between Nelson Mandela and South Africa's apartheid-era president F. W. de Klerk in 1992.

Yet the renewed attention on Davos was not just about diplomacy and deal-making. It was also about confrontation.

The Trump administration descended on the Swiss resort in force to push its America First agenda - the antithesis of the WEF's pro-globalisation creed.

"We are here to make a very clear point: globalisation has failed the West and the United States of America," US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick said during a panel discussion.

"It's a failed policy. It is what the WEF has stood for," Lutnick said.

This year's meeting also comes at a turning point for the WEF after its founder, Klaus Schwab, stepped down as head of the forum amid allegations of wrongdoing, for which he was later cleared after an internal investigation.

The head of US investment giant BlackRock, Larry Fink, took over as interim co-chair and acknowledged in his opening remarks to the forum the criticism that the WEF has faced.—AFP

NEWSMAKERS

PARIS: US fashion designer Willy Chavarria (right) stands beside Italian-US actor Julia Fox at the end of the menswear fall-winter collection.—AFP

THIS file picture dated Feb 13,2002, shows Ryan Wedding of Canada competing in the slalom event of the Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City, US.—Reuters

MOSUL: Children play during snowfall in Iraq's Kurdish region.—Reuters

ROME: Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz share a joke at the end of a press conference at Villa Doria Pamphilj.—AFP

Ex-Canadian Olympian arrested on drug trafficking charges

LOS ANGELES: Ryan Wedding, a Canadian former Olympic snowboarder turned alleged drug kingpin, was been arrested in Mexico on Thursday and brought to the United States to face cocaine trafficking and murder charges, FBI chief Kash Patel announced.

Wedding, 44, had been on the FBI's "Ten Most Wanted Fugitives" list, and the US State Department recently offered a $15 million reward for information leading to his capture.

"Just to tell you how bad of a guy Ryan Wedding is, he went from an Olympic snowboarder to the largest narco trafficker in modern times," Patel said at an airport tarmac press conference in Ontario, California.

"He is a modern day El Chapo. He is a modern day Pablo Escobar.

"This individual and his organisation in the Sinaloa cartel poured narcotics into the streets of North America and killed too many of our youth and corrupted too many of our citizens," he said.

Patel said Wedding, whose aliases include "El Jefe", "Giant" and "Public Enemy", was arrested in Mexico City.

The FBI director declined to provide any details about Wedding's capture other than to say it was an "inter-agency wide effort" that included law enforcement partners in Mexico.

Patel said Wedding is believed to have been hiding in Mexico for over a decade and has been wanted on cocaine trafficking and murder charges since 2024.—AFP

BANGKOK: Three prime ministerial candidates, Yodchanan Wongsawat (centre), Suriya Juangroongruangkit (left) and Julapun Amornvivat hold each other's hands whilst campaigning ahead of Thailand's general election next month.—AFP